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Scientists: Buffelgrass a threat

Call for millions in funding to eradicate non-native, fire-fueling 'noxious weed'

By Erica Meltzer

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Scientists from the Desert Laboratory issued a call to arms on Tuesday, telling Pima County it must spend millions to eradicate buffelgrass or face the "unhinging" of the Sonoran Desert ecosystem.

Julio Betancourt, a senior scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey, painted a bleak picture in his presentation to the Pima County Board of Supervisors.

The African grass, imported by cattle ranchers in the early 20th century, spreads prolifically, especially along roadways. It has fueled destructive fires in recent years in a landscape that's not fire-adapted.

Betancourt said buffelgrass has taken over as much as a third of the desert in Sonora and is spreading rapidly in Pima County. It threatens the open space purchased by the county under recent bond programs, as well as homes in the Foothills.

Fed by the heavy rains, the grass is responsible for the verdant hillsides more typical of Ireland than Southern Arizona. But when the monsoon rains recede, it could be fuel for next year's fires.

Betancourt predicted an erosion of tourist revenues and property values within 20 years as saguaros and palo verdes give way to the grass, which the state deemed a noxious weed last year.

"I think ultimately we'll see the unhinging of a unique American ecosystem," he said. "Wherever you have a buffelgrass fire, nothing else will grow there forever."

Workers will be using an herbicide on Tumamoc Hill and "A" Mountain to kill buffelgrass there in the next few weeks. People may see a blue tinge on the hills. It's a dye in the herbicide to mark which areas already have been sprayed.

The herbicide kills the buffelgrass without affecting other plants, Betancourt said.

Meg Weesner, chief of science and resource management at Saguaro National Park, said spraying there has been very successful in killing existing stands, but it doesn't kill the seed, which can sprout again after a rain, even two to three years after it first dropped.

The park hasn't been able to spray this year because all the employees certified to use the herbicide left for other jobs, and they have not been able to fill the positions. Weesner said the park plans to pull out some grass by hand.

Betancourt said eradication is possible, but requires political will and resources. He called on Pima County to spend millions, rather than tens of thousands, and to work with other jurisdictions on eradication.

Betancourt urged the county to enact control measures, including:

- Aggressively promoting fire suppression in the Sonoran Desert.
- Passing and enforcing a ban on buffelgrass in landscaping.
- Funding removal along roads and in open space.
- Streamlining the procurement process for landscapers (because sprays work only when buffelgrass is green).
- Developing a "SWAT" team focused on buffelgrass eradication.
- Promoting cooperation with other jurisdictions.

County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry agreed with Betancourt's assessment of the situation and said the county

will put more money toward buffelgrass removal next year.

So far, the county has put roughly \$100,000 toward buffelgrass removal, most of it along county roads.

County Natural Resources Division Manager Kerry Baldwin said he tries to do a buffelgrass survey on all new open space properties coming into the county, but he has no money for eradication.

Supervisor Ann Day said the county needs cooperation from the state and federal governments. Without efforts on state trust and Bureau of Land Management land, eradication attempts on county land are futile, she said.

"It doesn't just grow on Pima County lands," she said.

The supervisors plan to sign a letter drafted by Betancourt inviting other government agencies to a summit on buffelgrass eradication.

In other business, the supervisors unanimously approved a settlement with Clear Channel over billboards the county contends are illegal. The settlement includes the removal of 57 billboards, 19 of them within 90 days. Another 26 billboards will be modified, and all lighted billboards must use cutoff lights.

The supervisors also passed an ordinance requiring that wolf-dog hybrids be sterilized to prevent further breeding and appointed the members of an advisory committee to study the use of Internet filters on library computers.

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